

Before the House Energy & Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Digital Commerce & Consumer Protection

Hearing on

“Outdoor Recreation: Vast Impact of the Great Outdoors”

April 27, 2017

Testimony of

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Chairman Latta, Ranking Member Schakowsky, and members of the subcommittee.

Thank you for the chance to testify on behalf of REI Co-op. I’m proud to appear alongside my recreation-industry colleagues and share the great news about our sector’s economic impact.

REI was founded almost 80 years ago as a co-op in Seattle – when 23 climbers came together to get good deals on climbing axes from Europe and other great gear. Today, REI has 145 stores in 36 states, plus over 16 million co-op members. We buy gear and apparel from over 1,000 companies from around the country. We get thousands of Americans into the outdoors via our own classes, outings and adventure travel trips.

If there are two thoughts I want to leave you with today, they are:

- First, the more we understand the outdoor sector, the more we can create jobs and opportunity;
- Second, the outdoors significantly enhances Americans’ quality of life and contributes to a stronger America overall.

As a jumping off point – and on behalf of the Co-op’s members – let me thank the committee for passing the OUTDOOR Rec Act last year. It will assure that the United States measures our sector’s contributions with more authority and detail. The law is foundational to our shared path forward.

My industry colleagues have spoken to the latest economic assessment. I won’t repeat the details. In my experience – when policymakers hear this data – they are hungry to learn how they can use it for economic development. The outdoor sector has many positive economic attributes:

- We are made up of thousands of Main Street businesses and entrepreneurs. We have prominent brands like REI, but the reality is our jobs are spread across businesses large and small. In rural towns, recreation is often the economic lifeblood.
- We are an innovative sector, and this country is the global hotbed of outdoor product innovation. Back in Seattle, we employ designers, as well as specialists in materials science and advanced manufacturing. We buy from dozens of other vendors high-tech camping gear, outdoor electronics and performance apparel.
- We also run sustainable businesses. In REI's own operations we work to minimize our environmental impact. Since 2008, we have grown revenue by 78% but limited growth in energy consumption to 4.5%. We are now 100% powered by renewable energy. We also invest in nonprofits, volunteerism and consumer-education to protect our public lands, because healthy public lands are the infrastructure our sector relies on.

Policymakers want to learn how to grow these innovative, Main Street, sustainable businesses. For instance, I know of economic development projects currently bubbling in Arkansas, Oregon, Utah and Washington. With data generated by the Rec Act, we should be able to move economic development along even faster. So again, thank you for your work on the legislation.

Then, there are the spillover benefits outdoor recreation generates.

- In some ways, our sector can be seen as adjacent to healthcare, but at the front end. An increasing body of science shows that time outdoors – exercising or rejuvenating – is good for you. It's low-cost preventative medicine. In some exciting REI-backed research, thought leaders at Cal Berkeley are finding that time outdoors can mitigate PTSD symptoms in our returning vets.
- Our sector also fosters positive community development. We know that towns with great outdoor opportunities attract a wider range of new businesses, both in the outdoor sector and beyond. We know that access to safe green spaces in cities, makes neighborhoods more cohesive, with a stronger social fabric. We know the more people walk and bike to jobs or transit, the more sustainable our transportation networks will be.
- The outdoors can even be part of childhood development. There is an increasing body of research that shows that kids open their minds in unique ways when they can explore and play outdoors.

All of these attributes, in the long run, contribute to a healthier economy, healthier people, healthier communities – and a stronger country.

We have limited time today, but REI looks forward to continuing the dialogue with this committee. At REI, we say, “a life outdoors is a life well lived.” Together, we can make that a reality for more people, more communities, and more businesses.

At REI, we also know we can be more “United Outside.” The outdoors is cherished and defended by America's leaders, left, right and center. We look forward to working with members of this committee with that united spirit in mind. Thank you.